

April 5, 2015

FOSTER AGENCY WOES NOT HEEDED

Troubled nonprofit
was paid millions by
L.A. County despite
repeated warnings.

BY GARRETT THEROLF

Los Angeles County officials paid a foster care nonprofit millions of dollars in taxpayer money even though government investigators repeatedly warned of problems with the organization, including allegations of financial misconduct and child abuse.

County officials eventually severed ties with Little People's World late last year after the Los Angeles County district attorney filed criminal charges against the nonprofit's executive director, CSJ Kidogo, and his wife, Kitaji Kidogo, accusing them of embezzling and misappropriating \$460,000 of government funds.

The Kidogos have pleaded not guilty and are awaiting trial. One of their attorneys, Austin Dove, said prosecutors were trying to hold the couple accountable for financial bookkeeping rules that were never properly communicated by county officials.

The criminal allegations against the Kidogos raise questions about the effectiveness of reforms implemented in recent years by the county's Department of Children and Family Services to better monitor the foster care providers it hires. Two years ago, the agency hired additional staff to guard against financial misconduct following a series of stories by The Times that revealed that money intended for the care of children was often misspent by contract providers.

In some cases, money was spent on personal vacations, luxury cars, fine china and salaries for employees who didn't exist, The Times found. More than \$11 million of county funds allegedly had been misappropriated by nonprofits between 2000 and 2010, county audits show.

Little People's World, which has repeatedly drawn [See Foster, B8]

County was slow to cut ties to troubled agency

[Foster, from B1] scrutiny for irregular spending over the years, runs two group homes in Compton and two in Riverside County. The organization cared for about 28 children requiring high-level care because of their special needs and received about \$2.5 million annually from the counties.

In 2011, the L.A. County auditor-controller identified \$182,000 alleged financial improprieties. The bulk of the allegedly misappropriated money was used to purchase personal property for the Kidogos in Riverside, Northern California and Oklahoma, according to the audit. The county initiated efforts to recover the money at that time.

As auditors continued their inquiry, they learned in 2012 that large quantities of employee time cards, financial records and board of directors meeting minutes had been taken to the city dump in violation of the agency's contract with the county. Little People's World said that the mistake was inadvertent and that auditors did not inform the Department of Children and Family Services, which oversaw the contract.

In May 2013, the auditor-controller handed the Los Angeles County D.A. a sec-

ond audit saying that not all the money reported in the 2011 audit had been repaid and that the Kidogos and their daughter had received "questionable" raises of up to 134% — more than making up for the amount that had been repaid. The auditor recommended that the DCFS consider ending its relationship with Little People's World.

As the financial problems surfaced, so did reports of abuse.

In 2011, state regulators reviewed surveillance video of Little People's World staffer Rashard McMorris dragging a 6-year-old across the floor and into another room. He was given a two-day suspension and training on how to respect foster youths' rights, according to county investigation reports.

Two years later, the records show, investigators from the California Department of Social Services reviewed another video of McMorris pushing an 11-year-old into a wall. The force of the child's head hitting the wall left a hole in the drywall, the records state. McMorris received training on emergency intervention techniques and was placed on conditional employment status under a plan approved by the state, accord-

ing to the county reports.

Neither incident was reported to law enforcement, a spokesman for the California Department of Social Services said.

In January 2014, a complaint to the county's child abuse hotline accused McMorris of punching a child in 2013. Social workers ruled the complaint unfounded, but McMorris was banned by the DCFS from further contact with Los Angeles County foster youths because of prior incidents. McMorris could not be reached for comment for this story.

Following the D.A.'s charges, DCFS Director Philip Browning removed all of the Los Angeles County children from Little People's World and canceled its contract with the county. He said he did not act sooner because he was unaware of the child abuse findings. Staff reports he received did not contain that information, he said.

Thirteen children from Riverside County remain in Little People's World homes. Jennie Pettit, assistant director of the Riverside County Department of Public Social Services, said social workers had stepped up their monitoring of the charity with weekly visits by so-

cial workers.

The agency also verified that the nonprofit had sufficient cash on hand to care for the children and received assurances that the Kidogos would no longer be involved.

"The children are safe, and their needs are being met," Pettit said.

Dove, one of the Kidogo's attorneys, said the embezzlement charges were at odds with years of communication his clients had with the DCFS.

He said Little People's World had been a licensed contractor for 30 years, often passing county audits, and "received numerous accolades" from the department.

"DCFS regularly drops the ball on training and oversight of its contractors. Then it abdicates its shortcomings to the district attorney's office for prosecution," Dove said. "DCFS should focus on getting its own house in order. Ultimately, the victims of this process may be the children in the foster care system."

"This spectacle is more about the continued dysfunction of Department of Children and Family Services than my clients' criminal culpability," Dove said.

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Youth lockups found in 'full compliance'

After six years, federal monitoring ends at L.A. County juvenile probation camps.

BY ABBY SEWELL

Federal officials have ended six years of special oversight of Los Angeles County's juvenile probation camps, saying local officials have implemented reforms to improve conditions and prevent abuse of young offenders.

In a report released to The Times on Friday, a team of monitors overseeing a settlement agreement between the county and U.S. Department of Justice wrote that the probation agency is now in "full compliance."

The Justice Department began investigating conditions in the county's 19 probation camps in 2006, after repeated reports of abuses. Two years later, the county agreed to a settlement outlining a series of reforms that included measures to prevent abuse of youth and misconduct by probation officers, as well as to ensure camps were adequately staffed.

Later, conditions were added requiring expanded programs to keep teens from entering juvenile lockups.

The monitoring was supposed to end in 2012, but was

extended two years when the county fell short on reforms.

Probation Chief Jerry Powers, who took the reins of the county agency in late 2011, said it was "teetering on the brink of a takeover" when he arrived.

"We weren't even treading water," he said. "We were losing ground in a lot of areas."

[See Probation, B5]



Getty Images

Prominent advocate for gun control

Sarah Brady, widow of James Brady, who was wounded in the attack on President Reagan, has died at 73.

OBITUARIES, B6

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Youth lockup reform efforts lauded

[Probation, from B1]

To have turned the camps around and ended federal monitoring is "a huge accomplishment," he said.

The monitoring team found the county had made changes to prevent excessive use of force, including overuse of pepper spray by staff. Other measures were implemented to reduce youth-on-youth violence, prevent suicide and help young inmates transition back into society.

The number of youths in juvenile halls and camps has decreased substantially over the last few years. But the federal monitors said the county should explore policies allowing more low- and medium-risk juvenile offenders to be cited and released rather than being locked up while they await court appearances.

Michael Graham, a former L.A. County assistant sheriff who headed the monitoring team, commended county officials for their efforts to "change attitudes that had been in place for a very long time."

"They're no longer at a point that would be considered to be below a constitutional standard," he said.

Graham said the department should continue to reduce the number of children in the lockups, focus on upgrading aging facilities and consider implementing ongoing independent monitoring of its operations.

In a statement, County Supervisor Michael D. Antonovich said, "This is an outstanding achievement for all of the county departments involved, including the probation department, department of health services and mental health."

Two of his colleagues were more circumspect.

"We appreciate the significant changes that have been made in the camps," Supervisor Hilda Solis said in a statement. "But we are a long way from camps that are rehabilitative rather than punitive."

Solis said she is looking "very closely" at policies governing solitary confinement and family visits and at ways to expand workforce training for the youths.

Supervisor Mark Ridley-Thomas said the Justice Department did not focus on other issues, including fiscal and personnel issues, the "quality of the experience the youngsters are having" and the rate at which they re-offend.

"It's a big department, with a lot of issues to be addressed," he said. "The memorandum of agreement was not designed to address all of those issues."

Felicia Cotton, the deputy probation chief in charge of the juvenile lockups, said the department may add an outside oversight body.

"I think we have made some great inroads," she said. "I don't want to make it appear that we have arrived, but we have made some major strides."

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